

# High time

Photo by Heath Moffat Photography



By Robin Brunet

**With the range of safety programs and equipment available to today's steep slope roofers, there's no need to take dangerous shortcuts.**

**F**ormer steep slope roofer Jay Beddows had only been a corporate safety officer at Parker Johnston Industries Ltd. for one year when he got to witness first-hand the consequences of ignoring safety protocols.

His co-worker was roped off, but decided to release the slack on his fall protection device in order to move from one part of the roof to another.

"He was cutting a piece of wood, and he slipped and fell over the edge," Beddows recalls. "He dropped 13 feet and landed feet-first on concrete. He was never the same again."

In 2010, steep slope roofers accounted for 35 percent of all WorkSafeBC penalties. As well, this subsector of the construction industry represented more than

40 percent of all WorkSafeBC construction claims and more than 80 percent of all claim costs. With each claim averaging almost \$64,000, workplace injuries have cost this particular trade \$14.4 million over the past five years – not to mention an immeasurable loss of life.

Nonetheless, steep slope roofers have an abundance of safety training programs to choose from in B.C., so there's really no excuse for the terrible toll on workers' health and safety, says Shirley Caldwell, education and training manager for the Roofing Contractors Association of British Columbia (RCABC). "We overhauled our programs in 2009 and now provide everything workers and contractors need to know about avoiding hazards and injury," she says.



Nate Nelson, crew foreman for Parker Johnston Industries, conducts a tear-off of old asphalt shingles on a sloped roof in Saanich, B.C.

Unfortunately, a lack of education and training – particularly in the residential steep slope roofing sector – has prompted many contractors to take safety shortcuts. Mike McKenna, executive director of the B.C. Construction Safety Alliance (BCCSA), says pressures to meet demand lead to hasty errors in judgement. “Many roofing companies are small operations whose contractors demand fast work and feel they don’t have time for operating fall arrest lines.”

## How to stay safe on high

Beddows draws on his years of experience as a roofer and safety officer to offer the following advice to workers:

- Attend any safety orientations to become familiar with the rules and hazards of the jobsite.
- Wear appropriate personal protective equipment as required for each hazard, and stop work if such equipment is not available.
- Inform your employer if you’re not trained or qualified to perform specific work procedures.
- Stop work and inform your employer if you cannot perform the work in accordance with established safety rules and guidelines.
- Exercise your right to refuse unsafe work.

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Beddows also cites the following six activities workers must avoid while working on a sloped roof:

- Do not perform work before a proper fall hazard assessment has been conducted, regardless of the height.
- Do not perform work before a proper electrical hazard assessment has been conducted.
- Do not perform work without fall protection when working above 3 m (10 ft.) or when faced with an exceptional hazard.
- Do not perform work without footwear that provides adequate traction on sloped surfaces.
- Do not perform work with fall protection equipment that is damaged, worn, or unable to provide a proper fit.
- Do not perform work using fall protection equipment that you have not been trained to use.

## Get in gear!

The main components (and associated components) of steep slope roofing safety equipment are as follows:

- CSA or ANSI standard fall restraint devices
- CSA or ANSI standard fall arrest systems
- Anchors that can support anywhere from 3.5 kN (800 lbs.) to 22 kN (5,000 lbs.), in accordance with the Occupational Health and Safety Regulation
- Lanyards, lifelines, and other connecting equipment

The OHS Regulation states that workers using fall restraint must wear a full body harness or a safety belt. When using fall arrest, a worker must wear a full body harness or other harness deemed acceptable by WorkSafeBC. The Regulation also requires safety gear to be

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regularly inspected and properly maintained, and to be removed from service if it's damaged, or after it has been used to arrest a worker's fall.

A number of safety and construction equipment suppliers – such as Acklands-Grainger, Jelco, and Hazmasters – provide the latest in fall protection gear. Derek Malone, outside sales manager for Hazmasters, says the latest equipment enables workers to operate with a minimum of hindrance. “Plus, the gear is ergonomically designed and comfortable to wear, which was not always the case in the past.”

As for design innovations, Malone says that descent and ascent systems are becoming more prevalent on jobsites where steep slope metal roofing prevents the installation of toe boards or footholds. “And rather than causing the descent to speed up, the latest descenders stop a worker's descent if he suddenly panics and squeezes the control handle extra-hard,” Malone says. “This feature still enables workers to control their speed of descent and location to park. And if the worker slips or lets go for any reason, the descender automatically stops.”

## A new look at safety

WorkSafeBC is working with members of the construction industry to host a future Metro-Vancouver-area roofing symposium for workers and contractors. “The purpose is to raise awareness about proper safety procedures, equipment, and supervision,” says WorkSafeBC construction industry specialist Kathy Tull.

In the meantime, it's up to roofing employers to set higher safety standards for their employees, Beddows says. At Parker



Johnston, he's redoubled his efforts to make his workplace accident-free after witnessing the trauma of a serious injury. “Today, our penalties for non-compliance start with being suspended a week without pay and end with unconditional termination. Plus, we have a safety fund that is paid out to crews that remain accident-free for a certain length of time,” Beddows says. “These initiatives may seem drastic, but they've nipped non-compliance in the bud.

“We're constantly looking for ways to mitigate risk. And that's how you create a culture of safety in what is an extremely hazardous environment.” 

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